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ABSTRACT

Though Dubois tried to begin a series of scientific studies on the Negro problem in America more than 70 years ago, only recently have attempts been made to present a true history of the Black man in institutions of higher learning. Until that time, the experience of the Black man was defined in Euro-American terms, or in most cases was completely ignored. In the last few years, "Operation Culturally Deprived," a series of interrelated activities grouped around the concept of the disadvantaged, cultural deprivation, social fragmentation, and psychological shipwreck, has become a mammoth industry and a classic boondoggle. There is danger that "Black Studies" may follow the same course if they follow certain trends. The first trend is "imperialism", the involvement of institutions without expertise in Black Culture that, until recently, didn't even admit Blacks. The second is "paternalism" on the part of foundations who decide in which direction Black Studies should go. The third is "nihilism," caused by the demand for Black Studies, often lacking in content, to be taught by Blacks and only for Blacks. The fourth is "materialism," whereby Black Studies become a major source of profit for the software industry. Another basic danger is that Black Studies will make analogies to white studies that have no relation to Black people, e.g., Black Freudianism, etc. The hope is for Black Studies to address the life and history of Blacks in America by avoiding the inherent dangers spoken of. (AF)

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BLACK STUDIES YEAR ONE

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BLACK STUDIES: YEAR ONE

Over seventy years ago, DuBois sought to begin at Atlanta University a series of scientific studies of the Negro problem in America. His venture was rewarded with only a modicum of success. There was adequate encouragement at Atlanta University, poor then as now. But he rapidly discovered that philanthropic organizations and agencies, supposedly wholly dedicated to spreading the blessings of science everywhere, were a little less than enthusiastic about scientific studies of the Black man. His tale is told with affecting dispassion in Dusk of Dawn and again in Chapter 13 of his second autobiography, written when he was in his nineties.

In 1919, DuBois engaged the first steps in his life-long unattained dream, the Encyclopedia Africana. This was doomed to disappointment, though he pursued the idea during his long years as editor of the Crisis and again on his return to Atlanta University in the 1930's. (His able assistant of the epoch, Dr. Irene Diggs, my colleague for many years, is a consultant at the present conference).

Nevertheless, the interest in the world and the background of Afro-Americans so carefully nurtured by DuBois, by Carter Woodson, by Benjamin Brawley, long a professor at Morehouse in the Atlanta University Center, by Kelly Miller, and many other eminent Black scholars of the first half of the

twentieth century, took a feeble hold in the hearts and minds of earnest Black seekers after truth. An important chapter in this quest for self-enlightenment was the formation of ladies literary societies throughout the nation, one at least named for DuBois himself and that back in 1906.

The strands and strains of the history of the study of Black folk by Afro-Americans is itself a story worth the exploring and the telling. Indeed, it requires exploration and telling if only because so much confusion, so much obfuscation, so much deliberate manipulation of the truth, some in ignorance, some in malice, is now the order of the day.

No people have believed more passionately in the American dream than Black Americans though none have had more reasons to disbelieve. And this very faith has had disasterous consequences both for their hearts and their minds, for their souls and their science. For, consciously, Black people, Black scholars, Black thinkers, have acquiesced in a reading of their history and their experience which has been biased, inaccurate, and unscientific in the extreme. The reading in which they have acquiesced as one which, defining all history in Euro-American terms, has sought to make of Black Americans a mirror people, reflecting, usually badly, what they have been taught by the cultural arbiters of planet earth. The Black folk intelligence long ago

grasped the point and expressed it in a pithy dramatic epigram:

Black girl: Mirror, mirror, on the wall
who is the fairest one of all?

Mirror: Snow White! And don't you forget it.

The examination of this phenomena, this acquiescence in Euro-American values, is itself a proper inquiry for Black studies, for it will serve as a warning against the newer excesses which, are already in full swing, as well as some of the older ones which have merely assumed Black masks. All such excesses bring truth to the service of tyranny, science to the service of cynics, and man to the servitude of myth.

In recent years, we have had, as a part of a general re-evaluation of the Euro-American ethos, the discovery that all has not been well in the study of the Black man, in what is taught (or not taught) about him, in what is written (or not written) about him, in what is examined (or not examined) about him. The discovery of such an obvious truth is not in itself remarkable, and that discovery is indeed only incidental to a larger truth, one which has always been perfectly obvious to all, that the Black man in the world that Europeans have made has fared ill. It is the reformulation of that truth, of that reality, which has engendered in its wake the demand that the study of the Black man be re-formulated as well.

Obviously, it has been felt and insisted upon, that the disproportion in the study of the Black man functions structurally in the injustice he experiences. That this disproportion is a consequence of that injustice and that it, in turn, nurtures that injustice, provoking both a positive and a negative rationale for it.

The negative rationale is clear enough. Examine the curriculum of ninety percent of American colleges of a short year ago and you will find that no where can the most diligent eye find any evidence from course offerings that Black men have lived and breathed, struggled and fought, labored and created. This fact must be placed in historical perspective. Colleges of 100 years ago carried in their course offerings little that had affected any division of the human race outside of the Hebrew Bible and the Greco-Roman world. But those colleges frankly disdained any competence to deal with the modern world. The American university of last year presumed to speak on all subjects to all men, and its spokesmen insisted quite vehemently that this was what they were doing. These omniscient curricula said in effect, "of the Black man there is nothing to say--".

A small number of American colleges, among which the Black colleges had an important place--a point, pointedly forgotten and ignored in the higher and rarer air where

some Black studies decisions are now being made-a small number of American colleges counted the Black man in. But there, more often than not, a positive rationale for injustice was provided, for the Black man was a problem, a social disaster, a misfit.

For several years we have had growing by leaps and bonds, a series of interrelated activities grouping around the concepts of disadvantage, cultural deprivation, social fragmentation, and psychological shipwreck.

The rewards in this enterprise have been great for certain schools, none Black, for certain individuals, none Black, and for certain foundations and agencies, none Black. It is equally obvious that no where, anywhere, have substantive numbers of Black people, the object of so much energy and so much solicitude and so much expenditure, profited or gained or advance. Operation Culturally Deprived has become a mammoth industry, a classic boondoggle in the good old American tradition. Pilot study has succeeded pilot study. Model after model has been devised. The single unvarying characteristic in all of this monumental activity exploitive of the situation of Black people is that Black people are almost never included in any of its planning and that all previous findings, knowledge, and insights, especially when they have issued from the work of Black scholars, studiously ignored. The industry has been subjected to a scathing

analysis in a recent article by Dean Edward Weaver of Atlanta University which appeared in Freedomways. I commend it to you.

Now, and as it were suddenly, we have Black Studies. Not the non-study of Black people. Not the study of the culturally deprived. But study, positively oriented, based on the search for truth, for meaning, and for significance. Now we have Black Studies. But do we? Here in this first year of the Black Academic Revolution we have a literal explosion in course offerings and programs in colleges from Puget Sound to the Florida keys. But do we have Black Studies? Or are we being set up for another giant academic boondoggle which will evade rather than focus upon its ostensible object?

Certain trends and tendencies need to be noted at the moment, for the Black studies picture is already extremely complex and threatens to become even more so. One tendency to be noted and deplored is the imperialistic approach. In the November issue of Negro Digest, editor Hoyt Fuller takes Mary Washington College and one Mr. Singh to task for establishing a Black Studies Journal in Fredericksburg, Virginia, that jewel of the Confederacy. This is clearly an act of imperialism motivated by opportunism. If Mary College has had any significance at all it was a symbol of inaccessibility to Black people. There are surely few there now. It is therefore, an act of presumption for it to attempt

to preempt this field. If Mary Washington College had suddenly become a center for Black Studies, a journal emanating from that institution would still be hard to take, but there is not even faint justification for it. There is such a thing as academic good manners. Such an act as the establishment of a Black Studies Journal at Mary Washington College is a classic violation of this code. What do you think would be the reaction if an American college which had recently refused Jewish students were to announce itself as the home of a Jewish Studies journal? Can you imagine the consequences? In the name of decency, I invite Mary Washington College and the scholars who have rushed to the editorial board of that journal to reconsider what is clearly an act of imperialism and, I urge those interested in Black Studies everywhere to be wary of such enterprises since their very mode of conception precludes their undertaking the tasks which they announce, in any constructive manner.

A second tendency is paternalism. This is kindlier in manner, but equally arrogant and is, I regret to say, found everywhere money is dispersed in the name of Black studies. Certain foundations, guided by arrogant program administrators, have already decided where the Black studies movement should go and propose spending their money so as to make it go in those directions. The pattern of spending of the Ford Foundation is very revealing in this regard. It has siphoned large

grants to parts where Black people were unknown, with the aim of darkening the student population and the curriculum. So far as I know, these grants are never accompanied by any conditions which assure anything more than a certain amount of activity. When approached last year about supporting the first Conference on African and African-American studies at Atlanta University the Ford Foundation blew hot and cold, and finally decided it could not do anything. It was as if if had suddenly become clear that something constructive might be done about Black studies in a Black institution and there is, to my knowledge, no desire in those circles to see this happen.

I should pay tribute in this respect to the National Endowment for the Humanities which, struggling with a small budget and impossible budgeting conditions, has nevertheless essayed what it could do without paternalism - at least in this area.

Another tendency to be noted with some concern is a nihilistic one which approves the existence of Black studies but which disclaims any attempt to set up a verifiable content for such programs. In many instances such an attitude results from misunderstanding the demands of Black students for Black teachers on the faculties of their institutions. Few Black students are so naive as to believe it is pigment

cells rather than brain cells that learn and teach. But they were dealing with people who unconsciously believe this, and it was necessary to shock them out of their mythology.

Establishing a Black studies program on a completely individual and particular basis (whether this is called autonomy or not) is academic nihilism and the alacrity with which certain respectable institutions accepted such alternatives is an indictment of them for triviality. I want to make it perfectly clear, however, that in many other institutions the abolition of archaic administrative practices in connection with Black studies programs cannot but be salutory for the whole institution.

A fourth tendency to be deplored is materialism. In a year's time, Black studies has become a major soft ware industry, responsive to the needs of the marketplace--a marketplace dominated by prejudice and its ally, ignorance. When we consider that this marketplace consists largely of schools and colleges, it must give us pause. Every few days, a new software operation surfaces, sometimes out of conventional publishing, sometimes out of nowhere. And the profit motive is written all over the operation. One of the high priorities for these few of us who have some authority in this field is to develop at least a warning system so that time and money are not squandered on the products of what is rapidly becoming little short of criminal activity.

Having looked at four dangerous external tendencies, all of which constitute challenges to Black studies, namely imperialism, paternalism, nihilism, and materialism, I now turn to a fundamental internal tendency, that of Black white studies.

The only process involved in setting up Black studies programs in most institutions up to the moment has been the assembling of materials in the manner in which this is done for other courses, sticking the label "Black" on it, and opening the door to the classroom. What is not fully appreciated is that the materials available for the most part, are worthless. They grow out of an ethno-centric bias so complete as to be laughable if it were not the tragedy of the age. The ultimate contribution of Black studies can be, to bring about an academic and intellectual revolution in which the whole story is told. But the whole story lies beneath the tissue of facts and non-facts; it is imbedded in premises and assumptions never once examined. Hence we note a proliferation of Black studies courses which are merely analogy to other courses taught in the institution, with no indication that their premises are to be new, fresh, tentative. The music of Black people requires something quite different from Euro-American musical theory as Alan Lomax has so brilliantly demonstrated. The behavior of

Black people will of course be aberrant if the norms do not take them into account. I see little awareness of this in the construction of Black studies courses, but this awareness is priority number one.

In Black white studies, we find the conventional schools staking out territory. There is Black Freudianism, Black existentialism. These are all European constructions, not wholly applicable to American life or even to all of Europe, and yet they are generalized into world explaining theories and the facts of life play second fiddle to them in analyses of Black reality. They generate only Black white studies, aided and abetted by statistics which exclude Black people from the norms.

Black studies is also challenged by the Cultural Deprivation Establishment. Entrenched in the nation's schools and benevolent agencies is a large careeristic army which has earned its spurs and its bread by posing as authorities on the culturally deprived. They have conducted projects and studies, for the most part, of massive irrelevancy, and frequently really dangerous in their import and scope. They have been financed by government and foundation. And they are loathe to be replaced by any new orientation on their captive subject. Being pragmatists all, they are committed to the philosophy, I would rather switch than fight. Accordingly we are seeing before our eyes a fabulous example of

shape-shifting--the Cultural Deprivation Establishment becoming the Black Studies Establishment. I say to this, enough! Let them clean up the debris they have created. I would confine the specialists on the culturally deprived to their specialty, and as it falls to pieces before their eyes and those of their donors, let them all hie to the hills.

The dangers that Black studies faces in this, Year One, are great and grave. It is the purpose of the Center for African and African-American studies and this conference, CAAS-2, to sound warning, to address the problems, and to mobilize effective resistance to the dangers. If is our purpose, joined with such organizations as the College Language Association, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and all who have already had the baptism by fire to see that the fundamental reform of American Society of which Black studies is a component part is not sabotaged and subverted by venality, pomposity, avarice and deceit.